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ABSTRACT

Cultural context is not the sole source of human knowledge. Postmodern theory, in both its deconstructionist and affirmative approaches, offers an incomplete basis by which to study race, class, and gender, and undermines ethical interaction. Deconstructionism calls for the abandonment of generalizable research findings, asserting that the concept of generalizability itself is flawed. If culture and context are all, the result is an increasingly factionalist society, with increasingly splintered groups increasingly battling one another for power. While affirmative postmodernism argues for pluralism as well, it does not suggest that such pluralism must lead to relativism. The affirmative postmodernists favor a form of democracy that promotes individual and minority group empowerment. Such a view appears to require a rejection of postmodern epistemology in favor of universal criteria. Much can be gained from a study of culture and context if theory systematically embeds within it the study of differences and similarities. Theoretical work on such topics as multicultural education and multi- and cross-cultural views of nature and moral life underscores such an approach. Such ideas can heighten the commitment to discovering and building upon common ground and differences among people, thereby helping advance knowledge and ethical sensibilities. (Contains 54 references.) (SG)

A Culturally Sensitive Analysis of Culture in the Context of Context: When is Enough Enough?

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A Culturally Sensitive Analysis of Culture in the Context of Context:

When is Enough Enough?

Perhaps I have overdone it with the title of this paper. But there is a problem I am worried about. Perhaps you are, too. Namely, postmodern theorists tell us that everything we know, and every means we have of knowing, fundamentally depend on culture and context. For example, Bruner (1989) says that because all knowledge is a product of a particular culture, in a particular context, theories cannot transcend their particularistic origins. Or Shweder (1991, p. 359) says that "because there is no homogeneous backdrop to our world," in our thinking and research we can only proceed case by case, or call it context by context. Do not get me wrong. I think studying culture and context is important. But when the study of culture and context draws too heavily on postmodern theory -- as it often does -- then I think we have a problem. Thus, in Section I, I offer a critique of postmodern theory by highlighting how it offers an incomplete basis by which to study race, class, and gender, and can undermine how we interact with one another from an ethical standpoint. In section II, I advance an alternative position that takes seriously culture and context, but within a distinctly modern framework.

Section I: Culture, Context, and Postmodernity

Postmodern theory is a broad term, and means different things to different people. Yet amidst such broad territory, two types of postmodern theories can be characterized on the basis of their epistemic claims: deconstruction postmodernism and affirmative postmodernism. Deconstruction (e.g., Culler, 1982; Derrida, 1978; Foucault, 1983; Morss, 1992; Norris, 1982; Scholes, 1989) sharply calls into question traditional scientific research methods and assumptions. For example, deconstructionists ask us to abandon our search for generalizable research findings since they claim that the concept of generalizability is itself flawed. How can one generalize if a priori every culture and context is different? In addition, deconstructionists ask that we abandon modern constructs of truth, morality, logic, objectivity, and even rationality. For what is considered true, moral, logical, objective or rational in one culture or context may not be so considered in another culture because such constructs only arise out of and gain meaning through culture and context.

In assessing deconstructionist theory, it is worth noting three related forms of internal contradictions within the theory itself. First, deconstructionists argue against theory building, and yet themselves advance a theoretical position. Second, deconstructionists seek to deconstruct the tools of logic, reason, and rationality, and yet they seek to do so with those very tools. Third, deconstructionists argue against privileging any position. Yet, if their theory (that holds that no theory can be true for everyone) holds for everyone, even for the person who mistakenly believes it false, then the theory does what it says cannot be done. It privileges itself. It establishes some basis for truth that transcends its own confines. (For a discussion of these and related issues, see, e.g., Crews, 1986, 1989; Hoy, 1985; Kahn 1991; Rosenau, 1992; Searle, 1983; Turiel, 1989, in press; Williams, 1985.)

More to the point here, consider a recent bitter controversy that involves Jacques Derrida, who is often credited with founding deconstruction. In 1987, Derrida provided an interview with a French newspaper that was later published in 1991 in a book by Columbia University Press, edited by Richard Wolin. In the interview, Derrida "explained Heidegger's enthusiasm for Nazism as an outgrowth of Western metaphysics and engaged in a deconstruction of Nazism and 'non-Nazism' in an attempt to show the 'law of resemblance' between them" (McMillen, 1993, A8). Wolin obtained appropriate permission from the French newspaper, which holds the copyright to Derrida's article, to translate and publish the interview in his volume. Wolin's volume documented Heidegger's intimate involvement with Nazism. Derrida had drawn heavily on Heidegger in formulating deconstruction. In granting Wolin permission to use Derrida's article, the newspaper had never notified Derrida. When Derrida came upon the published volume, with his interview included, he was outraged. In response, Derrida threatened Columbia University Press with legal action unless they halted any further printing of the volume. Wolin agreed that further printings could exclude the Derrida interview. Wolin only required that he be able to include an additional preface that commented on Derrida's actions. Derrida still objected, and Columbia University Press let the book go out of print after several months. For a detailed account of this episode, see in The New York Review of Books Sheenan's (1993a) article, Derrida's (1993) response, and Sheenan's (1993b) compelling rebuttal.

What is interesting to note for purposes here is the language Derrida uses in his response to Sheenan's (1993a) article. Derrida (1993) writes:

> I merely demanded that my interview be withdrawn from any subsequent printings or editions.... Do I not have the right to protest when a text of mine is published without my authorization, in a bad translation, and in what I think is a bad book? As I have since written to him, Mr. Wolin seems to be more eager to give lessons in political morality than to try to respect the authors he writes about and publishes, in a greater hurry to accuse than to understand difficult texts and thinking.... (p. 44)

How is it possible for Derrida -- who seeks to undermine the very notion of authorship -- to claim that he has been mistranslated? Does he now suggest that there are criteria or standards that transcend culture and context by which to judge the merits of a translation? Derrida asks that Mr. Wolin respect the authors he writes about. But whose notion of respect are we to respect? Or does Derrida now maintain that there is a fundamental core to the idea of "respect for author" that transcends culture and context? Finally, Derrida talks about his "right to protest." But are not "rights" part of the baggage of modernity that Derrida seeks to jettison? These questions are not meant as an ad Hominem attack on Derrida. His theory stands or falls regardless of his personal character and personal inconsistencies. These questions do highlight, however, that Derrida's own theory poorly supports the sort of claims he appears to want to motivate that involve general criteria for evaluating translations, respecting authors, and establishing rights.

In Derrida's response to the perceived injustice, he threatened Columbia University Press with legal action. Presumably, however, there is no higher law of justice to which a deconstructionist can actually appeal. Rather, such legal appeals merely provide one, often effective, means in Western culture to gain power to enforce personal demands. In deconstruction, judicial decisions are secondary, power primary. My point then is this. Deconstructionists ultimately have only one recourse when injustices occur: to gain power to stop the injustice. This is the reason that deconstructionists so often emphasize power in their analyses.

Now, the added twist to this scenario is that once deconstructionists gain power, it is very easy for them to fell prey to perpetrating the same injustices that they rebelled against. After all, other groups are the "other," are different, and thus potentially not deserving of the same moral considerations as those of one's own group. This is especially so given that the very construct of morality is but a product of person, place. Thus it is my contention, and worry, that deconstruction as a theory is open to become totalitarian, disregarding of human rights and dignity.

Such worries are not unfounded, Derrida aside. For example, a feminist scholar at the University of Illinois, Chicago was recently removed from teaching courses in sociology and women's studies (Magner, 1992). What appears to have happened is that a male student had disagreed with many of the teacher's feminist positions. As a result, according to university investigators, it followed that the teacher did not accord this male student the same classroom talking rights as female students, and pressured him to drop the course. And there is my be Because female students have been and often still are unjustly silenced in the classroom, this teacher saw no wrong with silencing a male student. Such exclusionary orientations, in the name of authenticating the female students' voice, abound in feminist scholarship (see, e.g., Daly, 1980).

Unchecked, such exclusion does not stop with men. After all, the category of woman (like the category of man or white or Jew or Muslim) is not singular. There are black women and white women. Hispanic women. Lesbians and heterosexual women. Married women and single women. I dare say that there are as many ways to categorize women as there are women. Thus if culture and context are all, we move toward an increasingly factionalist society. And if my view is correct -- that deconstructionists have little recourse except to gain power to enforce their views -- then increasingly splintered groups will increasingly battle one another for power. It is not a pretty picture.

Many postmodern theorists have been troubled by at least some of the above concerns about deconstruction, in theory and practice. In response, they have attempted to put forth modified positions which Rosenau (1992) and others have labeled as "affirmative" postmodern theories. Affirmative theories (e.g., Giroux, 1990; Hammer & MacLaren, 1991; Hassan, 1985; Murphy, 1987, 1988;

Richardson, 1988; Weiler & Mitchell, 1992; Wyschogrod, 1990) still argue for the plurality of value systems but do not maintain that such plurality necessarily leads to the relativism that is so troubling in deconstruction. As noted by Rosenau (1992) "[a]ffirmative post-modernists frequently employ terms such as oppression, exploitation, domination, liberation, freedom, insubordination, and resistance -- all of which imply judgment or at least a normative frame of reference in which some definitive preferences are expressed" (p. 136). Moreover, in contrast to nihilism that often pervades deconstructionist political theory, affirmatives often favor forms of democracy that empower individuals and especially underrepresented groups. At the same time, affirmatives usually embrace a deconstruction-like epistemology wherein it is maintained that all knowledge is socially constructed.

It is easy to applaud the affirmative's focus on democracy. But can affirmatives maintain their non-relativistic views in light of their deconstructionist-like epistemology? Affirmatives think they can, though are often circumspect in articulating exactly how. As I understand their position, however, the skeleton of their response looks something like this. They maintain that knowledge is not objective. At the same time they maintain that neither is knowledge subjective because knowledge is grounded in socially constituted relations, bounded by community. As Murphy (1988) says: "[A]narchy is not necessarily the outcome of postmodernism, because public discourse can culminate in the promulgation of social rules" (pp. 181-182). Thus like deconstructionists they deconstruct the objective/subjective polarity; but as affirmatives they maintain that not anything goes. QED: postmodernism without relativism.

The problem here lies in believing that majority opinion or community beliefs solves the problem of relativism, when in fact it does little more than raise the problem from an individual to group level. A case in point: Imagine people inside a house without windows listening to a slight pitter patter on the roof. After much discussion and factional power struggles, they all agree that it is raining outside. Then a person from outside their community, and literally from outside their house, walks from the beautiful sunny day into their house, and asserts that it is sunny outside. Now, presumably there are real occurrences of "raining" and "not raining". Presumably in this case the people inside the house are

simply mistaken in believing it is raining outside. Thus one can agree that the people inside the house have socially shared knowledge, and that that knowledge goes beyond mere subjectivity of each member. But to say that is not the same as to say that shared knowledge ipso-facto validates that knowledge. And the same holds true for ethical knowledge. A community can agree to discriminate against (or torture or slaughter) members from outside their community, but such agreements do not establish ethical validity.

Affirmatives might respond by saying that for a community to have valid ethical knowledge, not only must members within its community agree to it (thus protecting their own members from oppression), but similarly any time norms are applied to outside members, then those outside members must agree as well. Perhaps affirmatives would thereby establish the following principle: Membership in a democratic community is accorded to those who are affected by its norms, and, in addition, certain norms must protect minority from majority oppression. A move like this then begins to bound the ethical by establishing universal criteria, and by a conception of what constitutes oppression in a principled and privileged, if not objective, sense. In so doing, affirmatives begin to cast aside their postmodern epistemology, as they must if they are to escape serious internal contradictions or ethical relativism.

I am suggesting, then, that we study issues pertaining to culture and context without the baggage of postmodern theory. Granted, such constructs as truth, morality, logic, objectivity, and rationality are hard ones to pin down philosophically; but, still, such constructs are allies, not enemies. And I would think such a bald statement should hardly need stating, except that the opposite so often gets said.

Section II: The Study of Differences and Similarities

Differences between people are important to understand, and such differences should often be respected, if not celebrated, as postmodernists highlight. But a theoretical orientation is needed that focuses more than on differences. After all, it would be impossible to understand an other if that other was not -- in important and meaningful ways -- like us. Imagine if we go to a "strange" people and see them routinely putting organic matter into their mouth and swallowing. We might assume that they, like

us, need to eat to survive, and that we are watching people eat. We might be wrong, of course. It is possible, for example, that we are instead observing a religious rite that has little to do with eating, and that the food in this instance symbolizes something of religious significance. Here, of course, we would be assuming that these people believe in something along religious lines, and that they can and do use symbolic thought. We might be wrong, again. But if we are wrong about too many fundamental categories, we will have no basis by which to understand them in any meaningful way.

Perhaps you recall a poignant passage in Shakespeare's Richard II. It is toward the last third of the play, and King Richard has been imprisoned, and reflects on his earlier pompousness, and on the human condition, and his relation to the common person.

> I live with bread like you, feel want, taste grief,
> Need friends. Subjected thus,
> How can you say to me I am a king? (III, i, 175-77)

Like all others, Richard has similar biological needs (to eat), psychological states (feeling want and grief) and interpersonal goals (for friendship). Such similarities leads Richard to recognize disenfranchised people as similar to himself, opening the way for his understanding of otherness, and including others within his moral community. Indeed, for Shakespeare's plays -- or, for example, the Anancy stories from Jamaica and Africa -- to continue to profoundly affect audiences centuries later, and countries removed, speaks to the power of common ideas and problems that transcend culture and context.

I am suggesting, then, that in the study of culture and context much can be gained if theory systematically embeds within it the study of differences and similarities. By sketching some theorists' research, it is possible to get a sense of some of the ways in which theory that embeds this orientation can be worked, and the richness and importance of the data that results. Three areas are examined. The first concerns multicultural education, the second multicultural and cross-cultural views toward the natural environment, and the third assessing the moral life in multicultural and cross-cultural contexts.

Multicultural Education. Toward addressing the problems of multicultural education, Ogbu (e.g., 1977; 1990, 1992) distinguishes between voluntary (or immigrant) minorities from involuntary (or

Castelike) minorities. Voluntary minorities have moved to a country more or less voluntarily, and tend to bring a sense of who they are from their homeland. In contrast, involuntary minorities are people who were originally brought into a country against their will, or colonized against their will. Thereafter, these minorities are often relegated to menial positions and denied true assimilation into the mainstream society.

Ogbu's research suggests that involuntary minorities experience more difficulties than voluntary minorities in school learning partly because of the relationship between their cultures and the mainstream culture. For example, voluntary minorities expect to have to cross cultural boundaries to succeed, and compare their standard of success (however meager) to worse conditions in their home country. When voluntary minorities do succeed, they often remain visible members of their community, which show other community members that (a) with hard work success is possible, and (b) that one can retain one's cultural community affiliations and still be successful in the mainstream culture. In contrast, involuntary minorities, such as Black Americans, have no actual "back home" to compare their condition to, unless it is to an earlier time when Whites had enslaved them. Thus Black students often face a great deal of peer pressure not to be successful academically, for such an achievement would mean that one has become an "Uncle Tom" and joined the "enemy." Moreover, when individual Blacks do achieve success, they are perceived to have escaped their cultural community, and rarely reaffiliate with it. Thus Black youths face a powerful dilemma which they cannot easily resolve: either they must give up their cultural affiliation and succeed academically (and only possibly be assured success in the White culture), or retain their cultural affiliation and fail academically. All too often Black youths choose the latter, consciously or unconsciously.

While Ogbu's research has spanned several decades, and has a richness and depth that escapes easy summary, the point here is that Ogbu has investigated culture and context within a theoretical framework that seeks substantively to understand differences and similarities between peoples. In the United States, Blacks, Native Americans, early Mexican-Americans in the Southwest, and native Hawaiians (while different on important dimensions) all share a similar feature of being involuntary or

castelike immigrants. In turn, Chinese, Koreans, Japanese, and Punjabi Indians, among other peoples (while also different on important dimensions) share the similar feature of being voluntary immigrants. Such common ground between some peoples, and differences between others, help us understand the differential success in learning between various cultural constituencies in the United States. This is not to say, however, that immigrant standing is fixed or static. It changes over time, as cultures change. Indeed, immigrant standing can change for a people across context. For example, while Koreans are a voluntary minority in the United States, they are an involuntary minority in Japan. Thus a focus on differences and similarities allows Ogbu the room he needs to develop a dynamic theory of multicultural education. It is important to notice that from a postmodern perspective presumably such research would be shunned for attempting to formulate powerful generalizations that cut across culture and context.

Multicultural and Cross-Cultural Views Toward the Natural Environment. It is often said that environmental concerns are the product of a white, economically-privileged class of people, and that people of color, especially in the inner-cities, have little time or interest in such matters. Current research by myself and a colleague (Kahn & Friedman, 1993) addressed this widely held perception. Our study examined whether and if so how children in an inner-city Black community in Houston understand and have interest in the natural environment: with animals, plants, trees, landscapes, the earth.

One overriding finding it is that the perception of inner city black children as being unaware of and uninterested in environmental issues is too simplistic, and runs roughshod over the rich and diverse ways these children have environmental knowledge, concerns, and values. For example, the majority of the children (about 80%) said that animals, plants, and parks are an important part of their life. Over 70% of the children have had conversations about the environment with family members. Virtually all of the children (96%) believed it was wrong to pollute a bayou. They maintained this judgment even in cases where another person pollutes (96%), their whole community pollutes (94%), and a community

pollutes in a geographically distant location (87%). Each of these findings was statistically significant at the .01 level.

Many of these children's reasons for protecting the environment focused on what we called homocentric justifications: reasons that ultimately refer back to ways in which protecting nature protects humans interest: personal interests, other's welfare, and societal welfare. For example, one child said that throwing garbage in a local waterway was wrong because he wouldn't otherwise "get to see all the colors of the plants and the beauty of the whole, of the whole natural plants." Another child argued against air pollution by saying that "air pollution goes by and people get sick; it really bothers me because that could be another person's life." There was some limited use of what we called biocentric justifications: reasons that give nature moral standing. For example, one child said "I think it's wrong to hurt animals because animals are just like human beings except they're from another life form and every human being, we all need not to be killed and natures, pets, and things like that, they don't need to be killed either, because they need the same respect we need." This child thus argues that animals, like people, merit respect and freedom to live. While we do not yet have comparable data for other cultural groups, these black children's justifications for protecting the environment appear similar to what is evident in our nation's dialogue about the need for environmental protection.

It is well known that Houston is a very polluted city, especially in terms of it air and water. Roughly two-thirds of the children we interviewed understood ideas of air and water pollution in general. However, only about one-third of these children believed that environmental issues affected them directly, and only about half of them believed that their community at large faced any environmental problems. How could this be? How could children who know about pollution in general, and live in an extremely polluted city, be unaware of their city's pollution? One possible answer is that to understand the idea of pollution, one needs to compare existing polluted states to less polluted states. But if one's only experience is with a certain amount of pollution, then that amount becomes not pollution, but the norm against which more polluted states are measured.

If we are right about this, then differences and similarities become apparent. Presumably these children are different from most white middle class children who live in a polluted city but who have had access to less polluted environments (national parks, camping trips, camps during the summer) by which to assess that pollution exists in their city. On the other hand, what we perceive in these children might well be the same sort of psychological condition that affects us all from generation to generation. People may take the natural environment they encounter during childhood, and use that as the norm against which pollution is measured later in their life. The crux here is that with each ensuring generation, the amount of environmental degradation increases, but each generation takes that amount as the norm, as the non-polluted state, just like the Black children in Houston take the existing level of pollution there as the non-polluted state against which further pollution gets measured. Such a finding -- which certainly needs further research to substantiate -- becomes motivated and substantiated because the overarching theory takes seriously both differences and similarities, not just differences.

This is not to say, however, that important cultural and contextual differences do not exist with these children. They do. For example, consider the following dialogue with one of our fifth grade girls.

> TELL ME ADRIENNE, DO YOU KNOW WHAT A BAYOU IS? Yes...It's where turtles live and the water is green because it is polluted. People -- some people need to um, some people are nasty. Some people, you know, like some people go down there and pee in the water. MM HMM. Like boys, they don't have no where to pee, and drunkers, they'll go do that, too. OKAY. And sometimes they'll take people down and rape them, and when they finished, they might throw 'em in the water or something. SO, WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE? HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT? A BAYOU? It's big and long and green and it stinks...And turtles live in it.

We asked this child, in a preliminary question, to tell us what a bayou is, and she provided a response filled with human violence. Presumably children growing up in a rural context, away from such human violence, would not describe a local waterway in such terms. Culture and context are important to analysis. But to focus on differences without similarities is to miss the rich relations of the lived life.

A similar focus on assessing similarities and differences can be found embedded in Kellert's research program on attitudes toward the natural environment. Over several decades, and many countries, Kellert (e.g., 1983, 1985, 1991, in press) has empirically refined a typology of nine categories of attitudes toward nature: utilitarian, naturalistic, ecologistic-scientific, aesthetic, symbolic, humanistic, moralistic, dominionistic, and negativistic. For example, the utilitarian attitude focuses on ways that nature provides humans with the physical means for sustenance, protection, and security; the ecologistic-scientific attitude emphasizes that nature can be understood through empirical, systematic, and precise study; and the humanistic attitude involves feelings of deep emotional attachment for individual elements of nature. Kellert's typology has successfully been employed to understand people's attitudes toward animals, hunting, birding, and farming, and has accounted for specific issues that involve gender, socioeconomic status, and place of residence. In addition, the typology has been used cross-culturally in understanding perspectives in Japan, Germany, and Botswana.

Based on his pervasive and systematic findings, Kellert suggests that the typology might capture universal categories of the human relationship to nature. If Kellert is correct here, then his research shows how others share deep and abiding similarities with ourselves. The common ground may arise because we all grow out of, interact with, and depend upon similar aspects of nature: water, rain, air, plants, animals, earth. At the same time, Kellert's theory is sensitive to cultural and contextual differences. For example, unlike a great deal of heterogeneous attitudes among his American populations, Kellert (1991) found that Japanese appreciation of nature was typically confined to particular animal species, frequently in contexts that emphasized control and manipulation of nature. Thus Kellert's sensitivity to potentially universal categories does not preclude meaningful analyses of cultural differences.

Assessing the Moral Life in Multicultural and Cross-cultural Contexts. The question of whether the moral life is similar or different across cultures poses consistently thorny problems in the moral-developmental literature. In particular, it is a question that often gets addressed in the context of moral relativism, of whether people of one culture can legitimately judge the practices of another culture.

Advocates of relativism often point to seemingly incommensurable practices of other cultures -- infanticide, cannibalism, suttee, slavery -- to support their claim for moral diversity, and the inability ever to find a single moral frame of reference by which to judge moral practices. But is it true that the moral life is so different between peoples? Any answer hinges on accurate and meaningful assessments.

Toward such assessments, several distinctions and issues are worth noting. First, it is important to distinguish morality from social conventions. According to Turiel (1983) and his colleagues (e.g., Killen, 1990; Laupa, 1991; Nucci, 1981, Smetana, 1982; Tisak, 1986), prototypic moral events involve intentional acts to cause harm or injustice to one or more unwilling participants, and are judged to be universally wrong regardless of rules or conventional practices that might sanction them. In contrast, social conventions serve to coordinate social interactions, and are viewed as legitimately different among peoples, depending upon context and culture. Prototypic social conventions include modes of dress and forms of address and greeting. For example, in Western countries people typically greet one another with a handshake, while in traditional Indian societies greetings occur with a pranam. In many dozens of studies (see Turiel, Killen, and Helwig [1987] for a review), including studies in Nigeria, Japan, the Virgin Islands, and India, and among the Amish and Orthodox Jews in the United States, research supports the proposition that people distinguish between moral and conventional practices. In assessing the moral life of peoples, it would do well for the researcher also to make such distinctions.

It is also important to distinguish moral judgments from informational assumptions about the nature of reality. For example, Shweder, Mahapatra, and Miller (1987) report on findings from their research in India that show that devout Hindu women believe it is immoral to eat fish. At first glance, such a moral belief seems highly discrepant with moral beliefs in Western societies. However, on closer inspection of the data, it can be found that traditional Hindus believe that if a widow eats fish she will harm her husband's spirit. In comparison to most Westerners, such Hindus differ in their assumption that spirits exist and that spirits can be hurt by earthly activity. But what is similar is that traditional Hindu women, like most women in Western countries, care about the welfare of their husbands, and act accordingly.

This role of informational assumptions in moral reasoning has begun to receive systematic attention. For example, in one study Wainryb (1991) presented individuals (in 6th grade, tenth grade, and college) with hypothetical situations where an actor engages in a prototypical moral violation (e.g., a father, out of frustration, spanks his son who has done nothing wrong). Then that violation was coupled with a potentially valid reason (e.g., a father spanked his son for repeatedly misbehaving). In the interview, subjects were asked to evaluate not only the act, but the informational assumption of the actor (e.g., that spanking is an efficient way to teach young children a lesson). Then the informational assumption that the subject believed to be true was changed to its opposite, and then the subjects were asked to reevaluate the act (e.g., "suppose that experts who know a lot about the ways children learn could prove that spanking does not teach children anything, would it be alright or not alright then for the father to spank his son for misbehaving?"). Results showed a significant change in subjects' act evaluations based on the manipulation of informational assumptions. Thus it appears that what individuals believe to be true, and what they hold as different criteria for what constitutes proof of truth, has a significant bearing on how they evaluate the moral legitimacy of an act (see also Madden, 1992; Turiel, Hildebrandt, & Wainryb, 1991; Wainryb, in press).

In assessing the moral life, it is also important to be sensitive to the ways in which different moral practices can be structured by similar moral concerns for others' welfare and justice. A case in point: In describing the Bushman of the Kalahari desert, van der Post (1958/1986) says that the Bushman leave their elderly to die alone in the desert. That practice may sound rather cruel to a Western sensibility. But when van der Post fills out the account of the Bushman's reasons, the practice seems far from strange. The Bushman are a nomadic people that depend on physical movement for their survival. The elderly are only left behind when they are no longer able to keep stride with the nomadic pace. When forced to leave a member behind, the tribe conducts ritual dances and ceremonies, and builds the person a token hut, and leaves a token amount of food: all apparently to convey honor and respect, and felt loss at their impending death -- an unavoidable death should the tribe as a whole be able to survive. When understood in this context, the Bushman practice becomes understandable. Indeed,

some may find it more humane and compassionate than the way the elderly are often treated in the United States: shunted off to nursing homes, isolated, and largely ignored.

When important moral differences do occur between peoples, it is not necessarily the case that the practices are believed legitimate by the victims. For example, Hatch reports that women in the Yanomamo tribe in Brazil were "occasionally beaten [by men], shot with barbed arrows, chopped with machetes or axes, and burned with firebrands" (p. 91). Hatch also reports that the Yanomamo women did not appear to enjoy such physically abusive treatment, and were seen running in apparent fear from such assaults. Psychological data of a similar effect can be found in a recent study by Turiel and Wainryb (in press) on the Druze population in Israel. The Druze largely live in segregated villages, are of Islamic religious orientation, and organized socially around patriarchal relationships. The father, as well as brothers, uncles, and other male relatives -- and eventually a woman's husband -- exercise considerable authority over women and girls in the family, and restrict their activities to a large degree. For example, women are not allowed to attend any place where there is mixed company, such as restaurants, cinemas, or the beach. They need permission from their father or husband to work, and usually turn over their salaries to their father or husband. However, when these women were interviewed, "a majority of them (78%) unequivocally stated that the husband's or father's demands and restrictions were unfair" (p. 44). Thus Yanomamo and Druz women -- like many women in Western societies -- are often unwilling victims within what they themselves perceive to be an uncaring or unjust society. In such situations, it is less the case that societies differ morally, and more that some societies (ours included) are involved explicitly in immoral practices.

This is not to say that meaningful and legitimate moral differences in the moral life between cultures do not exist. It is to say that assessing such differences is not straightforward; and I have suggested that accurate and meaningful assessments need to be sensitive as much to commonality as to difference.

Conclusion

With the increasing focus on issues pertaining, for example, to race, class, and gender, studies have increasingly relied on postmodern theory. Perhaps this is because postmodernism highlights differences, and thus can give a voice to the disenfranchised. But postmodernism also assumes that fundamentally there is little of importance that people share psychologically, and that epistemically there is little that transcends culture and context by which we can judge the intellectual or moral merits of such difference. This view seems to me not only empirically wrong, but politically unworthy in that it increasingly splinters people from one another, and promotes a view that power itself is the only legitimate regulator. Thus I have suggested that in the study of culture and context more can be gained by theory that in some way or another substantively embeds both the study of difference and commonality. To illustrate what is possible, I sketched a range of theoretical work on such diverse topics as multicultural education, multicultural and cross-cultural views toward the natural environment, and assessing the moral life in multicultural and cross-cultural contexts. It is hoped that the ideas presented here can heighten the commitment to discovering and building upon the common ground between people -- as much as recognizing and celebrating differences -- and by so doing help advance our knowledge and ethical sensibilities.

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